



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

Decision Notice

Vandalia Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Extension

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 6
54078 Hwy 2 West
Glasgow, MT 59230
406-228-3700

April 3, 2014

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) propose to extend the grazing lease for the Vandalia Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for 3 years, until September 15, 2016.

The 310 acre WMA is currently divided into two pastures, with a total maximum stocking rate of 239 AUMs, which are utilized as part of a three-pasture rest-rotation system. The third pasture comes in the form of a neighboring 900 acre private pasture. The current grazing rate charged for use of this WMA is the low (DNRC) grazing rate, as the lessee provides services and maintenance to the WMA.

During this proposed 3-year lease extension, MFWP intends to complete a new management plan for Vandalia WMA, which will provide prioritized management objectives of the WMA for providing productive wildlife habitat and hunting recreation. This effort will consider the role of livestock grazing and the condition of upland, riparian, and wetland habitats, among other WMA management components.

Alternative to the Proposed Action

Under the no action alternative, the grazing lease would not be extended; there would be no grazing on the Vandalia WMA. The 900 acre private pasture located directly adjacent to the WMA would no longer be managed as part of a 3 pasture rest rotation grazing system. To manage against trespass livestock, FWP would need to construct 0.75 miles of fence to separate the private in-holding from the rest of the WMA.

In the absence of a lease there would be reduced costs associated with monitoring the grazing system. However, there would be increased costs related to fence maintenance on the WMA, as these responsibilities have in the past been placed on the lessee.

The absence of grazing would increase residual grass cover on the WMA, which would for a time provide additional nesting cover for waterfowl, upland game birds and some species of grassland birds. Without periodic grazing disturbance, grass productivity is expected to decline, which would also affect palatability of vegetation for mule deer and white-tailed deer. The absence of grazing could result in an increase in fire fuels and wildfire risk.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process

FWP prepared a draft environment assessment (EA) pursuant to MEPA and is required to assess the potential impacts of the alternatives to the human and physical environment. The Vandalia Wildlife Management Area grazing lease renewal proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment. A 21-day public comment period ran from March 11 through March 31, 2014. Electronic notifications of the EA's availability were made to 22 individuals, agencies, and interested parties. Public notices of the draft Environmental Assessment were placed on the FWP web site and were announced in news releases to the area newspaper outlets. Hard copies were available at the FWP Region 6 office in Glasgow, and were offered via mail at request.

Summary of Public Comment

FWP received 4 written comments from 4 private individuals. Two of the comments (50%) were in support of the proposed grazing lease extension. The most common reasons given for supporting the grazing lease extension were:

- 1) Managing the land for multiple uses is beneficial for range management and wildlife.
- 2) The relationships that are built with area landowners through multiple use management are beneficial.

There were two private individuals in opposition to the grazing lease extension. The primary category of comments received was:

- 1) Cattle grazing reduces wildlife habitat and food availability.

FWP Responses to Public Comments

There were issues raised through the public comments that were submitted. The following is a summary of the issues raised and the responses to these comments.

Comment 1—Domestic cattle should not be used on the WMA. Cattle are not allowed to graze lands that are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and the wildlife has subsequently increased in those areas due to increased habitat.

FWP Response -- As was acknowledged in the EA (pages 9-10), livestock grazing does result in a reduction in vegetation height, resulting in less structural cover, and for some game bird species, reduced nesting habitat quality. The growing season grazing treatment, which overlaps with the majority of nesting activities, is restricted to 1/3rd of the grazed area, which allows the other 2/3rds to produce

maximum potential grass height and structure for a given growing season. As a longer term benefit, periodic grazing disturbance enhances plant productivity and vigor, which can enhance nesting cover for the pastures that receive deferred and rested grazing treatments.

Comment 2 – Livestock use of an area will decrease the quality of the habitat available for use by wintering wildlife, which in turn relates directly to a decrease in wildlife.

FWP Response -- The impacts of livestock grazing on wildlife species is highly dependent on the intensity of grazing pressure and season of use. Overgrazing can have long term detrimental impacts on wildlife habitat. The rest-rotation grazing system in place on this WMA helps avoid any potential long-term negative impacts from overgrazing. The rest-rotation grazing system ensures that pastures receive different grazing treatments annually, which supports the health and productivity of native grassland and riparian vegetation. Rotated grazing treatments also provide a diversity of grass heights. Areas with increased grass height and structure create security habitat and additional areas with increased palatability and vigor of vegetation are also available. Grazing has been shown to have the potential to improve the palatability and vigor of vegetation, resulting in an increase in habitat use by ungulates (Willms et al 1979, Anderson & Scherzinger, 1975; Jourdonnais, 1985). The diversity of grazed, deferred, and rested pastures provides for a mix of cover heights, which accommodates a mix of upland nesting bird species (VerCauteren and Gillihan 2009) and other wildlife (Krausman et al. 2009).

Comment 3 – Manage the land for multiple uses and don't overgraze.

FWP Response -- FWP currently manages this WMA for multiple use in the form of livestock grazing. The rest-rotation grazing system in place on this WMA helps avoid any potential long-term negative impacts from overgrazing. The rest-rotation grazing system ensures that pastures receive different grazing treatments annually, which supports the health and productivity of native grassland and riparian vegetation.

Comment 4 -- The system has worked very well for the last 20 years in terms of range management, wildlife management and positive relationships with hunters and landowners. Through this grazing system and the incorporation of the private land component, the management influence of FWP lands has greatly increased. The model of working closely with adjacent private landowners in broadening the influence of FWP-managed properties should be sought, when possible, in developing future management plans.

FWP Response -- FWP agrees that this cooperative system of grazing management has been beneficial in building positive relationships with hunters and landowners. As stated in the EA, FWP plans to evaluate the current grazing impacts to the range in conjunction with the development of a new management plan for the WMA.

Literature Cited

Anderson, E.W and Scherzinger, R.J. 1975. Improving quality of winter forage for elk by cattle grazing. J. Range Management 28(2):120-125

Jourdonnais, C.S. (1985) - *Prescribed fire and cattle grazing influences on the vegetation and elk use of a Rough Fescue Community*. Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 100pp

Krausman, P.R., D.E. Naugle, M.R. Frisina, R. Northrup, V.C. Bleich, W.M. Block, M.C. Wallace, and J.D. Wright. 2009. Livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, and rangeland values. Rangelands 31(5):15-19.

VerCauteren T. and S.W. Gillihan. 2004. Integrating bird conservation into range management. Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory 88 pp.

Willms, W, Mclean, A., Tucker, R. and Ritchie, T. 1979. Interactions between mule deer and cattle on big sagebrush range in British Columbia. J. Range Management 32:299-304.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment we have determined that the proposed action will not have significant effects on the human and physical environment associated with this action. Therefore an environmental assessment (EA) is the appropriate level of analysis for this project.

The extension of the grazing lease for the Vandalia WMA for three years would continue livestock grazing under the current rest-rotation grazing system. The lessee would be able to graze the WMA with a maximum of 239 AUMs from May 15th-September 15th.

After review of this proposal and the public comments submitted, it is my decision to accept the Decision Notice and Draft Environmental Assessment as final and to recommend the extension of the grazing lease on the Vandalia WMA.

The Record of Decision will be available for public viewing on the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks website at: <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices>. Copies of the EA and Record of Decision may also be obtained by contacting the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Glasgow Area Office, 54078 Hwy 2 West, Glasgow, MT 59230 (406-228-3700).

Signed,



Tom Flowers
Region 6 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Glasgow, MT 59230

From: Terry & Kay Stoppa [tkstoppa@gmail.com]
Sent: Wednesday, March 12, 2014 10:25 AM
To: Henry, Drew
Subject: WMA AREA

I feel that WMA should only be used for wildlife not domestic grazing. For years grazing was not allowed on CRP areas and the wildlife greatly increased due to the habitat created. T. Stoppa
CAC Region #6

From: Thomas Armentrout [trac500500@hotmail.com]
Sent: Thursday, March 13, 2014 12:34 PM
To: Henry, Drew
Cc: Gary Halls
Subject: Public Comments Sought on Vandalia WMA Grazing Proposal

I am opposed to using wildlife land for grazing,
Further more cattle shouldn't be allowed graze summer or any other season wildlife wintering grounds.
Reason is simple the of wildlife an area can sustain is equal too the quality of winter grounds less winter food
smaller wildlife herds period!

Thank You
Thomas R. Armentrout

From: Larry Wilbeck [lwilbeck@gpcom.net]
Sent: Sunday, March 16, 2014 6:30 PM
To: Henry, Drew

I am an out of stater, but since your state is made up of many public acres, (more then Half I believe I would like to think that I have some say but I know red necks and without their knowing it they believe in socialization of the risks but privitization of the profits, hard to imagine huh? ha!

Simply manage the land that is in the old fashion sense, multiple use. Some grazing of land is benefical, over grazing is not. Now if you district supervisor has the balls to stand up in the withering assault of people who like to over grazing public land for little or nothing cost , I guess my comments won't natter,

For your information I am a farm boy, pure hunter and fisherman, over educated but know false bull shit when I see it. DO YOUR JOB! manage this for the hunters (TAXPAYERS) as well as the FOX NEWS brain washeze who lease it.

From: Patrick [gundy.44@hotmail.com]
Sent: Saturday, March 22, 2014 8:43 AM
To: Henry, Drew
Subject: Vandalia WMA

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the grazing lease extension for the Vandalia WMA. The system has worked very well for the last 20 years in terms of range management, wildlife management and positive relationships with hunters and landowners. Through this grazing system and the incorporation of the private land component, the management influence of FWP lands has greatly increased. The model of working closely with adjacent private landowners in broadening the influence of FWP-managed properties should be sought, when possible, in developing future management plans. I want express my support for the continuation of the rest-rotation grazing lease while a new Management Plan is being written for the Vandalia WMA.

Pat Gunderson
Glasgow